

Palpable Possibilities: Experience of New Faculty in the CCOE

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One feeling that has remained throughout this first year is that it is heartening, yet at the same time disorienting how quickly it is possible for things to change in response to current conditions - like credential and program requirements - at a time when I am just trying to learn the ropes. Another is the palpable feeling of possibility within the CCOE. There are many opportunities, and lots of interconnections between/among people, initiatives, and programs. Once again, presenting a challenge in sorting things out, but at the same time exciting opportunities. (From an interview with one of the new faculty - Summer 1999)

In this article, we examine the experiences of new faculty entering the Charter College of Education at California State University, Los Angeles, the first charter college of its kind in the country. We were among seven new professors hired in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction in the Fall of 1998. During our first year in the Charter College of Education (CCOE), we participated as a cohort of new faculty in a number of events together that were intended to help us acclimate to the CCOE. We were interested in examining this acclimation process and as a result undertook an ethnographic self-study to explore the cultural understandings we were constructing (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Throughout the summer of 1999 – after we had completed our first academic year -- Carolyn Frank engaged us in ethnographic interviews (Agar, 1980; 1994; Frank, 1999) to identify our cultural knowledge of being members of the new faculty entering the Charter College of Education. She asked us to describe our experiences, to categorize these experiences, and to contrast them with other events (Anderson-Levitt, 2002; Eisenhart, 2001; Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002). The answers to these questions were analyzed using domain analysis for descriptive questions, taxonomic analysis for the structural questions, and componential analysis for the contrast questions (Spradley, 1979; Spradley & McCurdy, 1972). In other words, as we examined interview responses we made lists of the events, categorized them into different domains, and then compared these events with other events in the university (Green, Dixon, Zaharlick, 2003).

The process of examining our experiences began with a degree of uncertainty (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002), but resulted in a better understanding of the culture of our new college. The results of our self-study follow. We describe how we were welcomed into the CCOE, how we were invited into projects, how easy it was to make connections with other faculty, how much we felt valued and welcomed, how needed and valued our voices were, and what made the acclimation process easier or more difficult. We discovered that although there were similar experiences offered to us as new faculty members, each of us evaluated their usefulness in different ways. When asked to describe our experiences, we listed many events (e.g., advising students, supervising preservice teachers, developing syllabi, teaching courses, creating retention, tenure, promotion (RTP) portfolios, etc.). We then categorized these events into five categories:

Description of Experiences, Mentors in the CCOE, Differences in Lower and Higher Education, Challenges of Being New Professors in the CCOE, and Benefits of the Cohort of New Professors.

As the beginning quotation points out, one of the many difficulties of accessing the culture of the Charter College of Education was that the very thing that enabled faculty to work in new ways and create successful projects was the same thing that made it difficult for us to understand the kind of college we had joined. We did not know what a “charter college of education” was and many of the people we asked could not define it for us. Because they were still in the process of forming what it was, they did not yet want to limit it with strict definitions. There were many things that made the CCOE what it was – both tangible and intangible -- and the right combination of elements varied from one situation to another. That was what made it so difficult to define. Because of its fluid nature, it was hard for the new faculty to grasp what it was. Some seasoned faculty called it an “amoebae” but it seemed to us like a “whirlwind of activity.” However, as we gradually came to understand the “fluid” nature of the Charter College, we also began to understand what possibilities it held for us.

One of the new faculty members spoke for most of us during the beginning phase of our entrance into the school when she talked about the “charter” status in an interview:

I really cannot make a comparison between a charter school and a non-charter school for I lack experiences in other types of higher-educational settings. (Someone asked me) how I feel now that I am in a charter school. My answer to the query is, I do not know. I do not even know what CCOE means. I do not know how a charter school might be different from those that are not. I asked a senior faculty at the CCOE once during the last school year if they could tell me how CCOE works or how it is different from universities that are not a charter school. She changed the subject. Perhaps it was too complicated to explain, or it was an insignificant question, the answers to which I should have figured out on my own. If I can find out what it means to be in a charter school, that is, what choices and power are allowed, what the perimeters are around those choices and power, what obstacles may block what we may want to do, I would feel much more empowered.

Description of Experiences

Orientation to the university included the fall meetings where all the new professors met each other and their mentors. This orientation was one week before the quarter began and included sessions where we were introduced to each other and to the deans and associate deans. We were shown various aspects of our new site and given workshops about student demographics, health benefits, services offered, and campus organizations. While one of our cohort said the University orientation “was very intensive and overwhelming,” another stated:

We were extremely lucky to have those two days of orientation. We heard from the many program directors of the university who directed us on what goes on in the university. A plus for the orientation was the panel of "second-year" faculty members. During this session, they highlighted their experiences during their first year—what worked and what did not work, how to manage time, how to say no, why a writing day is essential, how to dissociate professional life from personal life, how to maintain one’s sanity, etc. They really put effort in coming up with suggestions and relating first-hand experiences to us. I truly appreciated that.

Some of us found that becoming a “professor” was not quite the sensational experience we had hoped for. It was at times very stressful to accept so many new responsibilities and pretend that we knew what we were doing. One member of our cohort explained it nicely when she said:

Most of the experiences I had provided insights into many of the deep norms that exist, particularly in the CCOE. The highlight of experiences that were particularly important for me, as a new faculty member, were student teacher supervision, committee participation, School-as-a-Whole meetings, the faculty partnership/mentor program, advisement, and the teaching cycle. In particular, the teaching cycle, complete with course and room assignment, developing a syllabus, ordering materials and books, understanding the students, adapting curriculum and instruction, and being formally evaluated by students was stressful and rewarding. In terms of how we were welcomed, invited to participate, and connected with more experienced faculty, the CCOE mentors were assigned to each new faculty member. There was little formal invitation into activities, rather, activities and opportunities were presented, there was a blanket welcome, and we were left to our own devices to figure out which would be best for each of us to be involved with. Some decisions were better than others. I found that when I reached out to different faculty, most of them responded warmly, and were comfortable and forthcoming in providing me insight to specific issues and questions I had. There was little guidance in how to ease into the work of a professor and how to prioritize, and I finished the year with a clear impression that being a university professor was not for sissies.

Mentors in the Charter College of Education

Each of us was assigned a mentor, a seasoned faculty member in our Division. The purpose of the mentor was to help us learn some of the nuts-and-bolts of “professoring” in the CCOE. Our mentors met with us both formally and informally to answer questions concerning instruction, student advisement, and other issues in the university. We knew we could ask them for advice and for help with some of the day-to-day challenges we faced. The usefulness of individual Mentor-Mentee relationships varied among us with some of us also seeking additional advice and support from other seasoned faculty. But the “institutionalization” of this support system was reassuring and appreciated by all.

One of our cohort suggested that mentors provided additional perspectives from which to view our new positions. She said:

About my mentor - she was very supportive and helpful and was out of my field. In some ways I think that was good. I was able to get a different viewpoint on things, such as what our RTP (retention, tenure, promotion) file should look like, what committees require more meetings than others. I might have a different viewpoint if I wasn't receiving support in my field, too, but I was, so all the variety of information left the ultimate decision up to me. (Our students might consider this approach to be confusing - just tell me what you want and I'll do it; rather than these are alternative ways to look at something and you make the decision that makes the most sense to you).

In addition to conferring with our assigned mentors, there were also times when some of us met with the Dean to talk about pay, evaluation, and tenure. We were also given release time in the winter quarter to attend a University-wide Faculty Development Program for all newly hired

faculty. We met on Fridays for presentations and discussions on topics related to instruction. Once again, the fact that the University had a structured program to support new faculty was heartening, even though our opinions differed about the content and usefulness of the program's activities.

Differences in Lower (K-12) and Higher Education

Four of the seven of us had recently completed terminal degrees and were hired as assistant professors. Our experiences with universities had been as teaching assistants, as students, or as adjunct instructors. Coming to the Charter College of Education as full-time, tenure-track professors meant taking on a whole new identity. Although we were all excited about the new role, many of us were not prepared. One of us said:

A third awakening for me was the transfer from a K-12 learning institution to a higher learning institution. In a K-12 environment, the requirements are not the same. Not that I am unfamiliar with post-secondary teaching, it is simply that more are expected of and from you. I must admit that I did underestimate the demands of a university faculty member. However, it was not to the point that I was not able to handle these demands. Granted that time is very limited and work keeps you always busy, it is not to the point that you lose control of the situation. You simply learn how to manage your time better and how to allocate time for certain activities.

Challenges of Being New Professors in the CCOE

Several of us came from other universities and were hired as associate professors. For these among us, challenges resulted not from transitioning from K-12 schools to a university but from transferring from one institution of higher education to another. Coming to terms with our new identities and how we fit into a new university culture was important.

Much of my initial orientation and feelings about being a new faculty member were colored by my previous university experience. Having been a tenure-track faculty member elsewhere, I couldn't help but compare experiences there with things I found here. Both tangibles (creature comforts) and intangibles (positive working relationships, the acceptance and support I felt, the investment in and loyalty of others to the CCOE). Initially the tangibles threw me and made me wonder if I'd made the right decision. (It was frustrating, even alarming, not to have a screen in my classroom, to have to continually borrow an overhead projector, to navigate dirty restrooms.) But it wasn't long before I came to primarily associate the intangibles with my new job, and knew I had. The students were, for the most part, so responsive and engaged. Their diverse backgrounds made class sessions interesting and often lively. They also made me look more closely at what and how I was teaching. (The first quarter one quiet student who never spoke during class, but often came to me afterwards, questioned whether it was "wrong" for boys and girls to have typically different play styles, or wrong to encourage gender-typed behavior. Class discussion had been dominated by students with more "feminist" perspectives and she'd gotten the impression that I'd agreed with them. After that I took a hard look at unintended messages I was sending.) Other faculty, both old and new, made it a pleasure to come to campus. Everyone was approachable and supportive, and seemed so relaxed and genuine.

The morale and camaraderie among old faculty was encouraging. And being part of a large cohort of new folks made it feel like I'd joined a special club.

While those of us with more university experience had a "head start" understanding the "professoring" part of our new positions, we needed to adjust those understandings to accommodate the new circumstances and university/college culture we encountered. We needed to relearn things such as operating procedures, where to find information, whom to ask questions of or what could be expected of staff. In addition, expectations for course and program development were new. One of us kept wondering throughout her first year who needed to approve her text book choices, syllabus inclusions, or course content. "Having come from an institution where faculty had less academic freedom, being able to make these decisions without required consultation was refreshing and empowering." Having opportunities to participate in the development of courses or programs was also exciting as we had not had similar opportunities elsewhere.

In addition to differences in specific job expectations, those of us with prior university experience felt the personal atmosphere -- faculty and staff morale and collegiality -- compared quite favorably to universities where we had been previously. The seasoned faculty in the CCOE were genuinely welcoming and friendly which made us feel that once hired, others wished us well and would be willing to help us succeed.

Benefits of the Cohort of New Professors

The final category, Benefits of the Cohort of New Professors, relates to experiences we had as members of a group of new hires within the Division of Curriculum and Instruction. Because we were trying to acclimate to our new positions in much the same way and because we did many things together -- both formal (e.g., the new faculty orientation) but more importantly informal (e.g., having lunch together) -- we began to think of ourselves as belonging together. And in the process, we came to depend on each other for "survival" during this year. Although we were working in different disciplines and teaching different courses, many of our experiences were the same. We all were supervising student teachers. We all faced the daunting prospect of retention, tenure and promotion from much the same perspective – trying to make sense of the requirements for advancement in a new context. We were all trying to understand how the College operated and where we fit into its culture. While we might not have been able to get definitive answers from each other about our questions, we could talk about our experiences, learn from each other, and feel supported in the process. As one of us wrote:

I am thankful that I am a part of a big group of new faculty members—a total of 11 for the entire Charter College of Education, 7 of which solely for the Division of Curriculum and Instruction! Being a part of this group meant that adjustment was not really difficult because we already formed a group and supported each other. We became a team and looked after each other. We shared ideas on where to go, how to acquire things, what to do, etc.

Another new faculty member felt that the cohort was also advantageous in helping new professors feel welcomed into the CCOE. Feeling the strength of numbers may also have been an empowering factor. One of us wrote:

The camaraderie among the new faculty was deeply felt and appreciated by all. With so many of us coming aboard at the same time, I think the experienced faculty gave us much credence without having to "prove our worth" as is sometimes the case when just one or two are hired. The numbers also helped in giving us voice at meetings - allowing us to ask otherwise "dumb" questions for the sake of all of us. I noticed that the new faculty jumped right in to positions requiring a great deal of responsibility.

While as a group and individually the new professors felt welcomed and supported in various ways by seasoned faculty, the fact that all of us were green and lacked the same kinds of knowledge about and experience in the CCOE provided our major source of support. Being part of a cohort was reassuring and relieved stresses that might have been more acute had we oriented to our new positions alone. One important and meaningful meeting of this cohort occurred in the spring of this first year. Everyone had to prepare a Retention/Tenure/Promotion (RTP) file to be reviewed by the Division Chair and the Dean. The cohort decided to meet as a group and figure out together what this "box" was supposed to look like. They met two weeks before the initial evaluation files were due bringing with them their mostly empty College-issued file boxes and artifacts to be sorted into categories according to the RTP Guidelines. By collaborating and giving each other suggestions, the process of preparing a file became a little less intimidating.

Changing Identities: From New Hire to University Professor

As we contrasted these events and categories, we had different evaluations of the usefulness of them for our initiation into the university. For example, when it came to the mentors, in some cases this was a successful arrangement with some of us stating that the relationship was helpful in acclimating to the university. Some of the mentor-mentee relationships became valued friendships as well as means for understanding the culture and mechanisms of the university. In other cases, the mentor-mentee relationships were less useful either on personal or practical levels. Other areas of disagreement included the usefulness of the Friday course on university instruction and the orientation meetings. However, all seven of us valued the Benefits of the Cohort of New Professors, where we got together to support each other on an informal basis, as important to their successful initiation into the university. In fact, we believed that our working relationship was so important that we presented our ethnographic study of our "newbie" professors' cohort at the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans in the year 2000. This presentation is encapsulated in "The Newbie Prof Handbook: How Information, Interest, Ideology, and Institution Affect the Acclimation Experience of a New Faculty," an ERIC document.

Our first-year experiences as seven new faculty in the CCOE may not differ appreciably from those of new faculty at other institutions. The acclimation process is a gradual one for all new hires. Some of the institutionalized programs and initiatives designed to help new faculty orient quickly and feel comfortable with their new responsibilities (assigned mentors, orientation sessions) are not uncommon among institutions of higher education. And many of these were judged to be useful in varying degrees by the new faculty. However, we found that the most useful experiences in acclimating to a new university originated from two sources. First, experiences that were based on personal connections and two-way communications, rather than on formalized institutional events, were the most useful in promoting acclimation to a university. Opportunities to share and communicate (with a cohort, mentors, seasoned faculty, or staff) provided the principal means for developing an understanding of the cultural and academic life of a university and for learning how to do one's job within it. These were more meaningful than more formal events

designed to provide information. Second, experiences and events that originated at the level where we spent the most time were more helpful in the acclimation process than those that originated at other levels. Connections with colleagues within our Division and information about Division procedures were more useful than College- or University-level connections and events, and likewise, College-level experiences were more useful than University-level experiences. Connections and events that were personally relevant and directly informed our work-related experiences seemed to positively influence and speed our acclimation.

Becoming a Charter College of Education Faculty Member

Although we didn't fully realize it at the time, the governance structure of the SAW and the democratic organization of our Division also accelerated our acclimation. Because both rely on abundant faculty participation in committee work and decision-making, everyone's participation is required and valued. We were immediately offered many and various opportunities to connect with others in our Division and the CCOE. During the opening week SAW meeting, we learned about and had opportunities to join clusters -- cross-divisional groups of faculty who share mutual interests such as Literacy, Early Childhood, or Technology. Likewise, at our first Curriculum and Instruction faculty meeting we were asked on which division-level committees we wished to serve (e.g., Instructional Policy, Faculty Policy, Honors Convocation). All of us signed up for at least one division committee. Throughout our first quarter we also had opportunities to join ad hoc committees, such as the Portfolio Implementation Committee. Being presented with so many different opportunities in the beginning seemed overwhelming to some of us, but it did enable us to meet frequently with and get to know more seasoned faculty quickly. The swiftness of this "initiation" process also helped us identify with others in our College and Division and feel that we belonged to both bodies.

Through committee work and other interactions with seasoned faculty we also began to understand some aspects of "charteredness." From the beginning the word "Charter" conveyed to us the notion that the College was exceptional in some way.

As a new faculty member I knew I was now part of something special – a Charter College, the first and only one in the country we'd been told – but I didn't quite know what that meant. The first day of new faculty orientation I stood to introduce myself as a new member of the College of Education. I was corrected by . . . [the University administrator at the podium]: "You mean CHARTER College of Education."

Although no one defined for us what this special status entailed, we witnessed some of the results: the highly participatory, although sometimes inefficient, School as a Whole meetings, the camaraderie among seasoned faculty who had been part of creating the Charter, and the fact that the College was able to respond relatively quickly to changing state requirements for teaching credentials. These experiences along with opportunities to work with others on CCOE committees, join existing projects, and form our own collaborations helped us to begin to understand that the Charter itself created possibilities. It seemed to be both the result of the dynamism we were experiencing and the framework for it. This dynamism – confusing though it was at times for us as "newbies" -- also helped us develop a sense of who we were as new professors and that we too could take initiative and accomplish new things. At the same time, we were learning that we couldn't say "yes" to every request or opportunity that came our way.

Choosing where to focus our efforts while simultaneously learning the ropes were the major challenges we encountered during our first year. Nonetheless, we saw that others who were hired before us were productive within the College and we felt the possibilities for our own endeavors in the place where we had landed.

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